

"I really wish I'd practiced this," Jon thought to himself as he clung to the spikes on Morghul's back for dear life.

The fearsome black dragon had never had a rider before and so had never worn a saddle, but even if he had, there'd have been no way to have one made and fitted to his back without word of it spreading, so he and Rhaenyra had never even considered it. That left Jon with no choice as the massive creature soared through the air, but to just cling to him desperately and hope he didn't slip.

"How the fuck did Bran ever enjoy this?" he asked himself, recalling his mad little cousin's love of climbing.

He pulled himself forward on Morghul's back, wanting to gaze over his shoulder, and started taking long, slow breaths to calm himself. Standing atop the Wall, even climbing up the damned thing hadn't been quite as harrowing as this, and looking through the ancient dragon's eyes had been infinitely more pleasant. He slowly got used to it, becoming more and more confident that his grip on his dragon's spikes was secure, and as he reached high enough on his back to finally see over his shoulder, it took his breath away.

"Gods," he whispered, gazing out at the seemingly endless expanse of blue before him.

He couldn't say how high up in the air they were by then, but it seemed like he could see for miles, something that was somehow more impressive when he was looking through his own eyes. They had flown northeast of Dragonstone by a fair distance while he struggled to get used to riding on Morghul's back, and through the remaining light of the evening sun, he could clearly make out the sight of a few ships in the distance.

"Fly lower," Jon called out, expressing the thought across their bond as well. "We're looking for a ship with blue sails."

He had seen through Morghul's eyes before and knew that dragons saw in color as well as humans did, something that he was fairly sure Maester Luwin once told him some animals didn't, though as the tragedy of Laenor's murder had shown him, he really didn't pay nearly as much attention to the man's lessons as he ought to have. He swallowed thickly at that thought, clenching his eyes shut as guilt roiled inside him. There would be plenty of time to wallow in it later, once he'd brought Qarl to justice, and so he forced it from his mind and opened his eyes narrowly, glaring out across the open sea.

"Dragon!" he heard someone scream from underneath him, and he ignored them, noting the purple sails on their ship.

"They're not moving terribly quickly," he noted, and he grinned, realizing that the wind he felt in his hair wasn't entirely because Morghul was flying through the air as quickly as he was. The winds were against them, then, something that they could push through a lot more speedily than ships could. *"I have time for the moment, and I will until the winds turn again, but I still have no real idea where they went. No one at the Dragon's Breath was sure where the Moon Maid was headed."*

He pushed into Morghul's mind for a moment, noting which direction he'd flown in, and got a rough idea of where they'd gone so far.

"He left hours ago, likely at a point where the winds were with him," Jon thought to himself, trying to remember everything Laenor had ever told him about ships.

He'd not been on many in his life, but his murdered friend certainly had and had shared some of that experience over the past few moons. He tried to picture some of the maps he'd seen of the narrow sea, recalling as best he could the rough positions of the various other locations near to Dragonstone and Driftmark. To the northeast there lay Claw Isle, to the southeast, Tarth, and directly east of them was the land of Andalos, with Pentos being slightly south of there.

"In the short time since the Moon Maid left, it can't have gotten all that far," he mused, reaching out to Morghul's mind and asking him to start sweeping up and down across the sea.

The massive dragon turned to the left and began doing as he'd asked, flying north towards the peninsula that lay not far from Dragonstone and then turning around and racing back south, turning again just as he reached Massey's Hook, moving ever eastward as he continued on. Jon doubted that the ship had managed to get as far as Stonedance, if it went south, and so he kept Morghul moving between those narrow points, watching keenly for any sign of a ship with blue sails. He spotted one after a few minutes, though as he drew closer, he saw that it was larger than the Moon Maid was supposed to be and continued on, noting the path it was taking just in case he had to pursue it again. The sun began setting as time wore on, and he swore at that, fearing that he was going to lose what hope he had of finding the cunt he was hunting.

"It was still somewhat high when I started," he thought to himself as Morghul flew rapidly northward, drawing close to what he assumed was Claw Isle. *"I can't return without Qarl, not when I could have prevented this whole thing had I..."*

He heard a low rumble from Morghul that drew his attention and his heart began to race as he saw what the dragon had noticed. In the distance, just to the northeast of House Celtigar's island, there was a ship, a sizable cog about the length that the ship manifest had jotted down for the Moon Maid with sails that he believed to be blue, though in the dying light of day, he couldn't be certain. Urging the giant black dragon onward, he grinned as he drew close enough to see that it truly did look like it was the same size as the ship he was looking for, with a single blue sail. As he grew close enough to be noticed, he heard one of them scream in Valyrian and knew that he'd found his quarry.

"Listen to me now!" he called out in the common tongue of Westeros, figuring that the captain likely spoke it. "I know that Qarl Correy is on your ship! Toss him overboard and I'll let you go unharmed. Refuse, and I will burn your ship to ashes."

He had learned to project his voice across a field long ago, and the open sea allowed it to carry even further. After repeating what he'd just said in Valyrian, his command of the language improved enough by then to be able to get the message across clearly, he sat back and waited, watching the men scramble around on deck. They didn't have any

scorpions on the ship that he could see, and even if they had, the chance of them doing any damage to a dragon as old and massive as Morghul was slim.

Luckily for them, they didn't seem to be stupid enough to even entertain the thought of fighting him anyway, and soon enough, he saw a struggling man being forced forward by a pair of other men towards the side of the ship. Even from the air, he quickly recognized Qarl, and he smiled grimly with satisfaction as he watched the man get thrown overboard.

"Pick him up gently," he commanded, reiterating the idea to Moghul over their bond, and the massive dragon, which had been holding itself in the air by beating his wings rhythmically against it for the short moment they had to wait, sprang into action, diving down and sinking one of his feet below the water. Jon pushed himself into his mind for just a moment to make sure he both got Qarl and didn't squeeze hard enough to kill him, and nodded as he realized that he had his prey. Without another word, he bade Morghul to turn around and return to Dragonstone, eager to see justice done.

"Prince Daemon?" one of the dragon handlers said in surprise. "His grace didn't say you were..."

"Out of our way!" Rhaenys hissed, pushing past the man as Daemon followed close behind.

"Yes, Princess," the man yelped, jumping aside and joining the others as they worked to ensure Meleys and Caraxes moved into their tunnels.

"Twas a time when no man would have dared even question me like he was about to," Daemon muttered, following his cousin as she marched out of the pit. "You did him a favor by interrupting him before he could finish."

"The men who work here have less fear than most," Rhaenys reminded him. "They'd have to, given what they do."

"Even still," Daemon scowled.

"Lord Commander?" a man called out, and they saw that a carriage was racing their way. "Good evening, and to you as well, Princess. Thought I recognized the Blood Wyrn and the Red Queen too. Rushed over as soon as I did, figuring you'd want to be driven away. Good Evening, "

"The Red Keep," Rhaenys commanded, tossing him a silver stag, which he caught with surprising speed.

"Tymeon?" Daemon asked, recognizing one of the first men he gave a gold cloak to. "What the fuck are you doing here?"

"Driving a carriage, you mean?" Tymeon asked as he urged the horses onward. "Some cunt got a lucky blow in and stabbed my right foot a couple years ago. Would have been fine, but the damn thing turned black."

"Fuck," Daemon muttered, shaking his head, and the man sighed.

"Lost the foot, but I lived," Tymeon muttered. "Couldn't exactly patrol with a peg, of course. Fucking thing's too loud, you see."

"And fighting with one foot is probably less than ideal too," Daemon thought to himself. "The Gold Cloaks lost one of their best."

"Kind of you to say, my prince," Tymeon said. "I get by."

"They still call you Lord Commander?" Rhaenys asked quietly as the two of them settled back in the carriage.

"I left quite the impression on them," Daemon replied, and she shrugged, focusing on the Red Keep as they drew close.

As they came to the outer gate of the keep, he noted that there wasn't terribly much noise coming from it, so he figured Viserys hadn't thrown a particularly lavish feast, which was probably good. His brother was going to be less than pleased to see him in general and pulling him away from one of the feasts he adored so much would only have added to that. The two Targaryens exited the carriage the moment they were by the main doors, and the guards stationed there both looked at them in surprise as they spotted them, though none spoke a word. They swept inside and quickly spotted Lord Lyonel, who had been in the process of ordering a few servants about.

"Prince Daemon? Princess Rhaenys?" he asked, furrowing his brow in confusion as he spotted the pair of them.

"Where is Viserys?" Rhaenys hissed and Lyonel took a step back when he noticed the pain and rage in her eyes.

"His Grace is having...a quiet meal...with the queen and their children," Lyonel replied. "What has happened?"

"Laenor Velayron has been murdered, and we think the man who did it has come here," Daemon explained. "I..."

"Daemon, what in the seven...what?" Viserys breathed, going from furious to disbelieving in moments as he heard what his brother had said. Daemon turned to spot his brother, coming down the nearby stairs towards them, and figured someone had told him that Caraxes had been spotted. "Murdered? How? Rhaenyra and the babes..."

"They're fine..." Daemon went to explain.

"Your daughter is fine!" Rhaenys spat, shaking as she felt like she was about to crumble into a thousand pieces. "My son...he..."

Viserys took her hand in his, his purple eyes damp as he stared down into hers, and for the first time since they were children, Rhaenys let him hug her, and she began to sob into his shoulder.

"I know the pain of losing a child, Rhaenys," Viserys said softly, running his fingers through her graying hair. "Gods, I'm so sorry. You think his murderer is here, Daemon?"

"We do," Daemon nodded. "I assume my banishment can be lifted, at least for the moment. My Gold Cloaks are more than up to the task, but I would lead this search myself."

"Go, do what you must," Viserys said, and his brother nodded before turning to leave. "Lyonel, assist him however he requires."

"What is going on?" Alicent asked, joining them, and Rhaenys stiffened, recalling where she was. She clenched her eyes shut and clenched her fists until her nails pricked her skin forcing herself to regain her composure.

"There's been a terrible crime committed on Dragonstone," Viserys replied as Daemon and Lyonel left together. "Laenor's been murdered."

"What?" Alicent gasped, clasping a hand over her mouth. "Who..."

"Qarl Correy," Rhaenys replied, furiously wiping her eyes, not wanting to look weak in front of a woman she'd never particularly cared for. "He fled here, so Daemon and I pursued him. I should go with them and..."

"Rhaenys, Daemon is more than up to this task," Viserys assured her, "and if you ventured into Flea Bottom, the men who will be searching for Ser Qarl would need to spend their time and energy protecting you instead."

"A lovers' spat gone wrong?" Alicent wondered, her mind racing at the development. She knew that her father had planted a spy in Dragonstone, or that's what she assumed the coded message he'd sent her meant. *"Could this be his doing? What good does Laenor's death do us, though?"*

Rhaenyra was unwed now and that actually made her more potentially dangerous. She was carrying her heir and the heir to Driftmark, but she was still very young, and plenty of noblemen would kill for the chance to wed her, which meant that she could strengthen her cause with a new marriage and alliance down the line.

"I am going to go mad just waiting around here," Rhaenys spat, and Viserys sighed.

"Rhaenys, I know we've had our differences over the years, but we are still family, and you've suffered an unimaginable loss," the king said softly. "Lean on us, on me, and let Daemon do what he does best. My brother has many, many faults, but he has always had a talent for violence, and I can't think of anyone more capable of tracking down a murderer. I can't actually fathom why he'd be fool enough to come here."

"Panicked people seldom make the wisest decisions, my love," Alicent said softly, resting a hand on Viserys' shoulder. "Princess Rhaenys, I am so sorry for your loss."

Rhaenys glared at her for a moment before looking away.

"The timing couldn't be worse," Viserys muttered. "This cannot be good for the babes..."

"The babes were born," Rhaenys whispered, feeling her chest spasm as she desperately tried to keep from crying again.

"What?" Viserys breathed, his lips twitching as joy and heartbreak warred inside him. "Gods, on this of all days."

"We were ecstatic," Rhaenys said, staring out the window, "overjoyed."

"I guess Corlys is with them now," Viserys sighed. "I'm so, so, sorry."

"Not as sorry as Qarl will be," Rhaenys growled. "One moment I was holding little Aegon and Aemon in my arms...gods, Aemon looks so much like Laenor already, and then..."

"Wait, what?" Alicent asked, half-convinced she'd misheard the older woman.

"Sorry, what did you say their names were?" Viserys asked, and Rhaenys wished she could take pleasure in it as all, as she turned around and saw the instant rage in Alicent's blue eyes.

She'd always thought the Hightowers to be grasping, her initial distaste for them coming when Otto made himself her grandfather's creature following her uncle's death. Alicent had served as the old man's nursemaid, another mark against her in Rhaenys' eyes, and followed that up by seducing her cousin. She recognized it for what it was: the Hand of the King putting his daughter in the bed of his grieving king so his blood would end up on the throne. The fact that Viserys didn't see them for the blatant schemers they were even after being forced to let Otto go over his unceasing efforts to convince him to make Aegon his heir was almost laughable, but that was neither here nor there. The point was that she hadn't much liked her even before she tied herself to Rhaenyra's cause and would have quite enjoyed informing her of the younger princess' decision to name her eldest what she did if she could still enjoy things.

"Aegon and Aemon, for the conqueror and my father," Rhaenys replied, and Viserys just blinked at her as Alicent's eyes turned icy.

"Did she not think that that might cause some confusion?" the queen asked through gritted teeth.

"To be fair to her, every Targaryen since the Conqueror has named a son Aegon," Viserys chuckled. "Aenys, Grandfather, Father, me. They seem healthy then?"

"Perfectly so," Rhaenys whispered, her eyes on the ground as grief roiled in her chest. "Perfect little bundles of joy, the both of them. They'll never even meet their father."

"It's not like they're his," Alicent thought to herself, rage blooming in her heart as she struggled to keep her expression blank. *"That little slut!"*

"If I can't be of use to Daemon and the others, then I'd like to lie down," Rhaenys said.

"I really wouldn't suggest being alone right now," Viserys said. "I know the impulse, I do. After Aemma and Baelon died, it was all I could do to get out of bed, but..."

"I need to lie down, Viserys," Rhaenys sighed, and he went quiet, nodding.

"Rhaenyra's chambers are maintained perpetually in case she shows up," Viserys said. "Make use of them."

"Thank you," Rhaenys nodded. "For everything."

She had wanted to rage at him for comparing their losses, as though losing a son you never knew could compare to losing one you raised and watched grow into a man, but his mention of Aemma stayed her tongue. He had lost even more than her that day, when his stubborn insistence on having a son resulted in tragedy, and she couldn't imagine what she'd do if she'd lost Corlys that day as well. She trudged towards Maegor's Holdfast, remembering where Rhaenyra's chambers were, and swore that with every step she felt like she'd gained hundred pounds.

The weight of her grief was crushing, and she wished she could just turn it all off. Wine might help with that, for a time, she knew, but she couldn't bring herself to touch a drop, not when there was a chance that her son's murderer might be dragged before her that night. She'd need to be sober for that, clearheaded for when she got the chance to vent her rage at the man who had taken her son from her. The servants let her into Rhaenyra's chambers and she shut the door behind her without a word, quickly making her way to the bed and lying down.

"Laenor," she whimpered, rolling onto her side and curling up.

Finally alone, she let go and wailed in pain and grief, wishing that Corlys was there and hoping that he'd managed to comfort Laena if she'd woken by then.

"What a disaster," Raylon Rivers thought to himself as he ran through the halls of Dragonstone, scarcely able to believe what his sisters had just told him. *"Laenor Velaryon dead and Jon a fucking dragonrider. What in the seven hells did the Hightowers get me into?"*

One thing was certain: Otto Hightower had had no idea what he was dealing with. If the man had any inkling that the Northern bastard he'd targeted had Targaryen blood in his veins and had bonded with a dragon, he'd have sent word to his daughter and had her inform the king, who would undoubtedly have moved against him. There would have been no need to resort to the tactics that he had. Instead, he'd thought that he was just a talented but random man of little actual importance, something that Raylon himself had believed as well when he agreed to work against him.

He'd found the man irksome during the tourney, his connection to the Blackwoods and obvious favor with the princess and her husband being a problem for his family. The idea of convincing Laenor's lover that there was something going on between the two men and watching the resulting chaos had seemed simple. What man, faced with the possibility that another man was trying to seduce his wife, wouldn't confront said man violently? He hadn't thought Correy stupid enough to actually attack Laenor himself but even that wouldn't have been so bad if not for the shocking revelation that followed.

"If he does manage to capture Qarl and the man blames me, it could end very, very badly for myself and my family," Raylon thought to himself.

Now, the likelihood of him finding the ship Qarl had snuck away on in the last couple hours of daylight seemed slim, but Raylon was a practical man, and he wasn't one to dismiss possibilities, especially when it concerned things he didn't know all that much about, like flying on a dragon. He came to a stop as he reached his destination, the top of Sea Dragon Tower, the tallest tower in the keep, and peered out across the dark sky.

"Raylon?" Wendel, one of the guards, asked. "What are you doing here?"

"The princess is in a state, understandable, of course," Raylon replied, and the man sighed.

Losing your husband the day your children are born," Wendel muttered. "The poor woman."

"Plenty of men have lost their wives the day their children were born," Raylon replied. "The difference is, they couldn't blame anything other than their cocks and the gods, whereas Princess Rhaenyra can put a name to this one. You see any sign of the dragon yet?"

"The moon's pretty full, but I still don't think I'm going to have an easy time spotting a black dragon against the night sky," Wendel muttered. "My eyes are pretty good, but not that good."

"Hopefully mine are," Raylon mumbled under his breath. "Do you mind if I wait with you? My sisters are worried about the princess and this seems like all I can really do."

"Be my guest," Wendel replied. "I heard you managed to deal with our rat problem."

"I got the little cunt," Raylon chuckled. "He was a springy thing and covered in scars. It's not often you get one that can evade cats, but like people, some rats are just lucky."

"Not lucky enough, as it turns out," Wendel commented and he sighed.

"We all have our luck run out eventually," Raylon said. "Nailed him in the head with a rock."

"Really?" Wendel asked and Raylon pulled out the sling he'd had since he was a boy.

"You'd be surprised how useful these things can be," he replied. "I was never as good an archer as I wanted to be; no matter how long I practiced or how many times our

master-at-arms advised me, the best I could be was adequate, and I didn't want to settle for adequate, so I sought out a different ranged weapon."

"Just seems a bit...primitive, I suppose," Wendel replied. "More like something I'd hear about those Dorthraki using."

"Funny you should mention the Dothraki," Raylon chuckled. "We had a horse back in Stone Hedge once that had badly broken its leg. The stable hands all said that there was nothing we could do for him and asked my father for permission to put him down cleanly. Given that he was going to die either way, I asked if I could try using my sling. Father agreed; I moved back thirty paces, and with a single stone between his eyes, I ended his suffering."

"A horse at thirty paces?" Wendel asked. "Impressive."

"I certainly thought s..." Raylon trailed off as he saw a shadow pass over the moon, and his jaw dropped when he realized that he'd seen what he thought he had. "The Cannibal..."

"Are you sure?" Wendel asked, using a Myrish Lens, the princess had given him as he stared off into the dark sky.

Raylon tried desperately to track the shadow he'd seen and grabbed the lens from his friend when he thought he'd spotted him again. His heart raced when he spotted the massive moving figure in the distance, and he gulped as he thought he saw something flailing around under it.

"Yes, he's there," he breathed, giving Wendel back the lens. "I'll..."

"Ring the bells!" Wendel bellowed, and Raylon looked at the man in shock. "Princess' orders. She wanted us all alerted when Jon returned. Still can't believe he can ride a dragon."

"That makes two of us," Raylon thought to himself furiously as he turned to leave. "I'll go tell the twins that he's come back, seemingly with a prisoner in tow."

"You could see that clearly?" Wendel asked. "Eyes like a hawk, you have."

"Not good enough," Raylon muttered, practically flying down the stairs.

If he'd seen anything that suggested Jon was a dragonrider, he honestly wouldn't have reported it to the Hightowers, not wanting to kick that particular hornet's nest, but would have just written that the princess seemed suspicious and that he was going to have to keep a low profile for a while. It had been one thing when he was working against a simple man, but quite another to work against someone who rode a creature as terrifying as the giant black beast he'd seen earlier that evening.

He reached the courtyard just a hair before the guards started pouring in and heard Corlys Velaryon gasp and growl when the Cannibal came in close enough to make out clearly, seeing just what the giant dragon had in his taloned foot. Qarl Correy was dumped

unceremoniously in the middle of the growing crowd, rolling multiple times before he came to a halt with a pained groan, and the massive dragon landed a moment later just behind him.

"You!" Corlys hissed and the man quaked in fear as he sat up.

"M...my lord, I'm so sor..." Qarl went to say, his eyes clearly displaying his fear, only to be cut off by a loud crack, which rang out across the courtyard as Corlys punched him across the face, making him fall back down.

"Don't you dare!" Corlys snarled, shaking his hand. "Don't you dare apologize as if anything you could say would justify what you did! Why? Laenor was nothing but generous and kind with you."

Jon slid along the Cannibal's wing and marched over, glaring venomously down at the prone man as Raylon's mind raced. He needed an opening, an excuse of any kind to strike Qarl so that if he accused him of anything after, he could blame it on that, and as he watched the knight struggle to his feet, he dearly hoped that he was about to do something stupid.

"Thank you for bringing him back," Corlys said, nodding at Jon, who continued to glare Qarl.

"Lord Laenor was my friend," he said softly, "a better friend than I deserved. There was no way I was letting his killer escape if I could help it."

"You," Qarl hissed, quivering with rage as he looked at Jon. "If not for your weird friendship with him, we'd have gotten into that fight, and I..."

Raylon saw his opening, and he took it, closing the distance between them and striking Qarl right in the jaw as hard as he could. The man cried out in pain, crumpling to the ground, and Raylon pulled his hand back, hoping, as it began to throb, that the bone he'd heard snap wasn't his own.

"Why in the hells did you do that?" Corlys hissed, whipping around and glaring at him.

"Begging your pardon, my lord, but that man looked to be advancing towards Ser Jon here with hostile intent, and I didn't want to chance that the very large, very dangerous dragon right over there would react to that poorly," Ser Raylon replied smoothly, and Corlys and Jon both turned to look at the Cannibal, who growled at Qarl.

"Easy, Morghul," Jon breathed, embracing the dragon's large snout. "He's no threat to me. He's no threat to anyone anymore."

"I ink oo ohk I ah," Qarl groaned, clutching his face.

"What was that?" Corlys asked.

"I think he said, 'I think you broke my jaw,' my Lord," Ser Harwin replied, and the aged lord swore as Raylon struggled to keep from smiling.

“Drag that filth to the cells,” Corlys muttered. “I must write to the capital and let them know that we captured him.”

“Yes, my lord,” Ser Harwin nodded, flinching as Morghul flew off. “Jon, could you give me a hand? I want to see this one to the cells personally.”

“Aye,” Jon nodded, figuring this conversation was overdue.

They each grabbed one of Qarl’s arms and dragged him to his feet before urging him onward as Raylon breathed a sigh of relief. His right hand ached; he may very well have cracked a bone, and it would be some time before it stopped bothering him, but he couldn’t even pretend to care. A little temporary pain was worth it to keep his head and if Qarl’s jaw actually was broken, the likelihood of him giving them much information before he was killed was slim.

“Even if he does say I told him that Laenor and Jon were lovers, I can deny it and then it will be my word against a murderer with reason to dislike me,” he thought to himself, making his way through the dispersing crowd, seeking his bed.

“That fucking bitch,” Alicent mumbled under her breath as she trudged into her chambers.

“Alicent?” Mina Florent, her cousin and the wife of Lord Ryan Florent, asked. “What’s wrong?”

“That fucking bitch,” Alicent muttered again, earning a look of concern from her cousin.

“My queen?” Alanna Ambrose, another of her ladies-in-waiting, asked as the others all put down their needlework and rose to see what was wrong.

“That fucking bitch!” Alicent shrieked, unable to hold back the fury in her heart anymore and she grunted as Mina rushed over and pulled her in for a hug.

“Ali, what’s wrong?” Mina asked.

“Should we send for someone?” another of her ladies asked.

“My queen, what’s wrong?” Ser Criston asked, opening the door and poking his head in, and she took a deep breath, trying to steady her frayed nerves.

“Let me get you some wine,” Alanna winced, quickly moving towards the jug in the corner and pouring her a healthy cup.

“What happened?” Mina asked again. “Is it related to why Prince Daemon returned?”

“Oh, that’s another nightmare altogether,” Alicent muttered, grabbing the cup and chugging the contents in a few gulps. She blushed as she realized how quickly she’d just downed the wine but didn’t correct Alanna as she refilled her cup.

"I hope his Grace sent that reprobate flying off again," Ser Criston scowled. "The princes and princess were concerned as I sent them to bed as the servant you sent said to."

"Viserys will not be sending Daemon off, at least not tonight," Alicent muttered. "Laenor Velaryon was murdered."

"What?" Mina breathed as the others all gasped.

"Daemon and Rhaenys showed up wanting to search for the murderer, as he had apparently fled here, and Viserys let Daemon conduct the search," Alicent explained.

"He'll have half the men in the city tortured and probably find nothing," Criston scowled.

"I do feel for the poor people of this city," Mina sighed. "Some of the things Uncle Otto told us about how the prince conducted himself when he was in charge of the City Watch..."

"That means that Rhaenyra is again unwed, and half the lords in the realm and their sons will seek to wed her," Alicent hissed, "and that's not the worst of it."

"I doubt she'll seem as attractive an option once she has her babes," Alanna said snootily. "Not only had her figure suffered terribly when we saw her last, but she'll already have her heir. They'll all know that they can't put their blood on the throne through wedding her."

"We're talking about the Targaryens, Alanna," Eleanor Costayne pointed out. "They could wed their child to her eldest and still get the same result, though we have to believe that Prince Aegon will succeed his grace."

"Which one?" Alicent scoffed, emptying her cup and grabbing the pitcher from Alanna so she could refill it herself.

"What?" Mina asked.

"I have to hand it to you, Rhaenyra, you really do live up to every stereotype of a spoiled princess," Alicent laughed bitterly, feeling the wine take its effect. "Not content to steal Aegon's birthright and his future, the fucking bitch stole his name too."

"She...wait, did she have her babes?" Mina asked, catching on quickly, and Cole growled as Alicent nodded.

"She named one of them Aegon?" he asked, sounding more furious than she'd ever heard him.

"She had the nerve?" Alanna asked, sounding revolted.

"Of course she did," Alicent spat. "She has more nerve than any king ever has. She'll whore herself to her uncle because she feels like it, get my father removed from his post, take what she likes, take a lover without shame, and..."

"Wait, who murdered Laenor?" Cole asked.

"Qarl Correy, apparently," Alicent sighed. "A lover's quarrel, no doubt."

"Was it?" Cole asked.

"Ser Criston, what are you saying?" Alicent asked.

"What are the chances that Rhaenyra's husband just happened to be murdered the day she birthed her babes?" Cole asked. "I mean, it sounds absurd."

"It is a fairly unusual coincidence," Mina replied. "What, do you think she had him killed?"

"I wouldn't put it, or frankly anything, past her," Cole replied. "Perhaps the babes came out with purple eyes and silver-gold hair, and she decided she didn't need him anymore. Both of their successions are secured with the two boys."

"Even if the babes did come out with purple hair...purple eyes and silver hair, they could die within the day," Alicent slurred, glaring at Mina as she took the jug of wine away.

"Let's set this aside for the moment, alright?" she asked, giving her a pointed look that reminded her entirely too much of her father. "I do agree that it doesn't seem like the princess has anything to gain from killing off her husband. If we're right about who fathered the children and why, he would have known all along, so what difference would it make after they were born?"

"I just wondered if perhaps she'd thought that she'd gotten all she needed from him and didn't need him anymore," Cole shrugged. "I know from experience how easily she can dismiss someone she feels isn't of use to her anymore. One of her sons is Lord Corlys' heir now and she will control Driftmark through him in time. If she were to wed again, perhaps to the son, another powerful lord, one with vast armies under his control, she could gain more resources through him."

"She's not that smart, Ser Criston," Alicent sighed. "She's a wicked thing, but she's a fool. The only way I could see this be her doing is she wanted to wed her lover afterward, but even she's not stupid enough to think she could wed some random bastard. Every time we meet for the rest of Viserys' life, she's going to rub in my face the fact that *her* Aegon will be king someday instead of mine, I just know it. I swear some days I feel like I could claw her eyes out."

"Let her make her pointless jests, Ali," Mina said softly, taking her hands in hers. "By the laws of gods and men, your son is the true heir to the throne, and we have to believe that Father and Uncle Otto will find a way to ensure he takes his place when the time comes. Now, do you want to join us in our sewing?"

"Maybe tomorrow," Alicent sighed. "I know you all gathered here for my sake, but I really don't feel up to it. I think I'm going to try to get some sleep."

"Understood," Alanna nodded.

"I'll make sure you're not disturbed," Cole promised, and she smiled.

“Viserys won’t bother me tonight; he’ll be too busy worrying about Rhaenyra, but if the children come for any reason, I will see them, of course,” Alicent replied, watching her ladies grab their needlework and leave.

“Of course,” Cole nodded, following them out and closing the door behind him.

“Let me help you out of your gown and I’ll go,” Mina said softly, and Alicent nodded.

“Thank you,” she sighed, hoping that she’d be able to get to sleep quickly. At least in her dreams, Rhaenyra couldn’t torment her.

“AHHH!” Owen screamed as one of the Gold Cloaks broke another of his fingers.

“You can end this at any point by just answering my question,” Daemon drawled a while later. “You have seven of those left, ten toes, and, of course, you probably have at least a couple dozen teeth we could pull if you really vex me, so we could be at this quite a while.”

“I do miss watching you work, Lord Commander,” Ser Luthor chuckled. “You, my unfortunate friend, were a right pain in the arse to track down.”

“I swear I’m just a spice trader!” Owen cried. “I’m no smuggler! I’m no smuggler, I swear!”

“We know you met with Qarl Correy while you were on Dragonstone,” Daemon hissed. “Where is he?”

“I don’t know!” Owen roared, struggling against the ropes he was bound to his chair with. “I did see Qarl; I admit that, but I didn’t take him with me!”

“You expect me to believe that the cunt interrupted you while you were in a brothel, you chatted for several minutes, and it wasn’t about his sudden need to disappear?” Daemon asked.

“I didn’t know anything about that,” Owen pleaded. “Qarl wanted to ask if I knew any traders in need of men for their crews. Said he’d had a falling out with his current patron and was looking for work. I didn’t need any other help, but I told him about a few that did. I had finished with Rosy already and was on my way out; that’s why I didn’t mind him bothering me. I swear we didn’t even discuss taking him with me.”

“That sounds like a believable story,” Daemon murmured. He waited until he saw hope in the man’s eyes before adding, “Almost.”

He snapped his fingers, and the Gold Cloak snapped another of Owen’s in turn, eliciting another agonized scream from the man.

“I’ll be back in a little while and we can try this again,” Daemon grinned.

“I’m telling the truth!” Owen screamed. “I’m telling the fucking truth!”

Daemon left, Luthor following close behind, and sighed.

"How have the others fared?" he asked.

"The captain's the only one who claims to know who Qarl Correy is, though it did take a finger to get that far with him," Luthor replied. "Some of the others have broken and said they saw a man named Qarl on board and it was all their captain's fault, but when ordered to describe him, not one of them have managed it successfully. Either they're all exceptionally well disciplined and unusually loyal to a man none of them should care enough to piss on if he caught fire in front of them, or..."

"Or we've been had," Daemon scowled, pinching the bridge of his nose.

"Do you think that's likely?" Luthor asked.

"It would mean that Correy went to the trouble of setting up a distraction before bugging off on another ship, pun not intended," Daemon muttered.

"That would be an unusual display of intelligence from a criminal," Luthor commented.

"Yes, but do recall that most of the scum we've gone after in the past have been entirely uneducated smallfolk," Daemon said. "Correy might be lowborn, but he's a household knight, one who presumably has had at least a little formal instruction in his life, and he fought in the Stepstones with us, so I'd expect him to have picked up at least a little of basic tactics."

"So he makes sure that he was publicly seen with a man sailing to the capital, figuring you won't hesitate to rush off here in search for him, and then stows away on another ship, presumably bound for somewhere in Essos," Luthor muttered, stroking his beard. "Fuck."

"That about sums it up," Daemon scowled, slamming his fist on the table and glaring at the door he'd just come through. "We'll continue working the dumb cunts over for a little while longer just in case we're wrong, but if none of them crack..."

"Lord Commander," Chett, one of his old lieutenants, said as he entered the room, and both Daemon and Luthor turned to look at him. "Our men finished scouring the Eel."

"And?" Daemon asked expectantly.

"We didn't expect to find anything tying it to this man you're searching for, and we didn't, but from what we've seen, it is a fully crewed ship, and we didn't find any evidence that space had been cleared in the storage hold or anywhere else for an additional man to stay," Chett replied.

"You wouldn't need to clear space for a man on your ship if you're just sailing from Dragonstone to King's Landing," Luthor pointed out. "For a trip that short, he could just stay wherever there was enough space for him to stand."

"Yes, it doesn't actually tell us anything," Daemon muttered. "Let's try again and see..."

"Prince Daemon! Prince Daemon!" a new voice called out, and Daemon turned to see a servant he recognized from the Red Keep.

"What is it?" he demanded.

"His Grace bade me find you and tell you that a raven came from Dragonstone," the man replied. "The man you seek, he's been arrested and brought back there."

"What?" Daemon asked. "How?"

"He didn't say, my prince," the servant replied. "I took a carriage here that I figured you could take either to the Keep or the Dragonpit."

"Do you know if Rhaenys has left yet?" Daemon asked.

"The princess left the moment word came, my prince," the servant replied. "His Grace had to all but order her to wait for an armed escort."

"Sounds like Rhaenys right now," Daemon muttered. "Luthor..."

"We'll patch them up and send them off," Luthor replied. "It was nice having you back, Lord Commander, even if only for a day."

"Thank you for letting me borrow your mantle," Daemon grinned, and Luthor chuckled.

"The mantle is yours, Prince Daemon," Luthor nodded. "I just wear it in your absence."

Daemon's grin grew wider at that and he nodded, clasping the man's forearm before leaving the East Barracks. His time at the helm of the City Watch had been one of the happiest of his life. Joining the men as they beat and butchered the criminal element into submission had been fun, but the best part of it had been taking a disorganized, corrupt group, purging it of its most useless and/or corrupt members, and then rebuilding it from scratch and watching it develop. Seeing these men, most of whom had no formal combat training, go from a disjointed, ragtag crew of thugs to a well-trained, disciplined order had been the pride of his life, something he imagined wasn't entirely unlike raising sons, and it pleased him to see that they had maintained his exacting standards even years after he was forced to depart.

"The dragonpit," Daemon commanded as he got in the carriage. *"I wonder how they managed to catch Correy. If he stuck around hoping that his distraction with the Eel would be enough to buy him a few days to purchase proper passage away from Westeros, he's an even dumber cunt than I imagined."*

"Where is he?" Rhaenys hissed before she'd even finished getting down from Meleys' saddle.

"Princess?" one of the guards asked. "At this hour, I didn't even recognize..."

"A dragon?" Rhaenys glared. "If you need a closer look, you need merely ask. Where is Qarl Correy? Rhaenyra's raven said he'd been captured."

"He was, Princess," the man replied, gulping at her obvious threat. "He's in the cells now, on order of your lord husband..."

"Her lord husband can take it from here," Corlys said tiredly and Rhaenys hugged him.

"I need to see him," she said at once.

"Rhaenys..." Corlys sighed.

"I need to," Rhaenys insisted. "I need to look him in the eye and ask him myself why he murdered our son. How did you find him anyway?"

"He had fled on a ship bound for Braavos," Corlys replied. "That's a long story, but at this hour, as exhausted as you look, you won't get much out of seeing him, and his jaw was broken not long after he was dumped back here, so questioning him won't get you far anyway. Come to bed and we can deal with the treasonous cunt in the morning."

"Dumped?" Rhaenys asked. "Corlys, tell me Laena didn't..."

"It wasn't Laena," Corlys sighed. "It was a complication."

"What?" Rhaenys asked.

"Gah!" Rhaenys gasped as she woke the next morning, feeling tears fill her eyes at once as that gnawing pain in her chest flared up immediately. It wasn't a terrible dream, she knew at once, and she wept, her weeping turning to sobbing as Corlys pulled her in close until her face was buried in his chest. "How are we to go on without him? How do I wake each morning knowing that he won't?"

"We'll find a way," Corlys wept, burying his face in her hair. "For Laena, for Aegon and Aemon, and for Laena's coming little ones."

"She did tell you the names then," Rhaenys said. "I hadn't recalled."

"I would have preferred Velaryon names," Corlys muttered, "but I understand her wanting her heir to have a Targaryen name, and I can't exactly fault her for naming Lae...my heir after your father."

"I should be overjoyed at that," Rhaenys said numbly.

"Should I call the servants to help you dress, or have them prepare a bath?" Corlys asked.

"My riding leathers will suffice," Rhaenys said, getting out of bed and tossing her nightgown over her head.

For the first time in his life, Corlys beheld his wife in the nude and didn't make some bawdy comment about it. He found he couldn't bring himself to and just shook his head before reaching for his own clothes. The two dressed in silence, neither able to think of anything more they felt like saying to the other, and Rhaenys finished first, another first for them, quickly leaving the quarters Rhaenyra had given to them.

"Princess Rhaenys, Princess Rhaenyra bade me ask you if you wished to break your fast in her solar with her," one of the guards said, and Rhaenys just sighed.

"I'm not hungry," she muttered. "I'm surprised she is."

"She has the babes to worry about," Corlys said as he joined her. "They're probably with her now."

"Well, I can see them after I..."

"Mother," Laena panted, walking over to her as quickly as she dared in her state, and Rhaenys smiled sadly.

"Laena," Rhaenys replied, hugging her daughter. "You were asleep by the time I returned."

"In my chambers," Laena corrected her. "I don't know if I slept at all last night."

"I know I drifted off at some point because I did dream," Rhaenys sighed.

"Glad to see you got back safely," Daemon snarked, and she glared at him.

"I was confident you knew the way back and didn't need my help," Rhaenys replied in kind.

"So did Corlys fill you in on how Qarl was found?" Daemon asked. "Laena told me when I sought her out after I returned."

"I did," Corlys replied. "I can't imagine you're terribly pleased at the idea of a random bastard flying a dragon."

"That random bastard brought our son's murderer to justice," Rhaenys muttered. "I intend to thank him when I next see him."

"I'd love to know how he managed it," Corlys said, and Rhaenys cocked an eyebrow.

"He's of an age with Rhaenyra, right?" she asked.

"As far as I know," Laena replied.

"Daemon, is there any chance he could be yours?" Rhaenys asked, and he froze. "You, Viserys, Uncle Baelon, Grandfather, and Uncle Vaegon were all alive when she was born, and of the five of you, you do seem the most likely choice. The least nauseating one as well."

"To be honest, I have begun to wonder that," Daemon said, eyeing Laena, who just shrugged.

"You weren't wed to me at the time," she said.

"You have?" Corlys asked, eyeing him curiously.

"I found out yesterday that he had bonded with the Cannibal, or Morghul as he's apparently named him," Daemon muttered. "Could I have slept with some Northerner around the time I wed Rhea? It's possible, though given how much I drank around that time, it could be quite some time before I recall it in any detail."

"Daemon, I'm going to see Correy," Rhaenys scowled. "If you'd like to come along, I'd appreciate your particular expertise."

"That's why we rushed over," Laena cut her off. "Rhaenyra ordered him to be bound to the wall of his cell for questioning. She'll be going down to the dungeon in a few minutes."

"She should be resting," Rhaenys muttered. "The woman had given birth no more than an hour or two before she started hobbling around with that ludicrous staff yesterday. I understood it, given the immediacy of everything, but now..."

"She wants to question him before His Grace comes," Laena replied.

"Viserys is coming here?" Rhaenys asked.

"His first grandsons were just born, and his goodson was murdered," Daemon replied, earning glares from both of them for his callousness. "Of course he'll come and probably bring that Hightower bitch and her brood with him. I don't blame Rhaenyra for wanting to get what she can over with."

"I do want to speak to him," Rhaenys replied. "I don't much care if he can reply or not."

The four of them made their way towards the dungeon, finding Rhaenyra waiting for them by its entrance, flanked by Jon and Harwin.

"I understand that you were the one who arrested my son's murderer, Ser Jon," Rhaenys said, and he stiffened under her amethyst gaze.

"I am, Princess," Jon nodded.

"You have my thanks," Rhaenys said. "I cannot imagine how much worse this would all be if he had escaped us."

"He nearly did," Daemon scowled. "The lengths he went to to get away from us were almost impressive."

"And yet more proof of his guilt," Rhaenyra said. "He was witnessed together with...Laenor before his murder and seen by another witness fleeing the scene with his hands covered in blood. He then went to extreme lengths to escape justice and admitted before

numerous witnesses last night that the two of them had a fight. I am still deeply displeased that he cannot be questioned..."

"His jaw is broken then?" Corlys asked.

"Maester Gerardys is fairly sure," Rhaenyra nodded. "Correy's guilt is obvious and I am more than ready to try him for his crimes."

"I was always fond of summary sentencing," Daemon smirked, and Rhaenyra smiled viciously.

"I want him to burn," Rhaenys hissed, tears filling her eyes again, "but I see no reason for him to be executed immediately. Letting him suffer here for a few more days would be fitting."

"My thoughts exactly," Rhaenyra replied. "When he is executed, though, Meleys can do the honors, if you'd like."

"Thank you," Rhaenys nodded.

"Come," Rhaenyra said, and she started her way down the stairs, still walking quite stiffly, though she didn't seem to need the staff she'd used the day before. Instead, she leaned on Ser Harwin, who helped her hobble down the steps as Jon carried a torch out in front of them.

The dungeon was as dark and dismal as any other, and they found that Qarl had been put in the cell nearest to the stairs, something that either Harwin did of his own initiative or Rhaenyra amended that morning for her own convenience. He had been chained to the far wall of his cell, his arms stretched outward above his head and his hands bound by manacles. His ankles were similarly bound, Rhaenys quickly noted as Jon's torch illuminated the cell enough to make out his basic shape, and she ground her teeth at the sight of them.

"Open the cell," Rhaenyra commanded, and Jon quickly did so, pushing his torch in further once he could to better show Qarl.

His face was swollen, the right side of his jaw practically purple, and his dark eyes went wide with fear when he spotted them. When he'd been dropped back on Dragonstone the night before, that was after a lengthy flight across the narrow sea, during which he'd thrown up twice and gone into a state of shocked silence. His terror at seeing Corlys after that had been somewhat muted by his sheer relief at being on land again, but after a night in a cell, a night during which he hadn't gotten any sleep at all, relief was the last thing he felt.

"Lo Cowo," he tried to get out, his broken jaw still useless and Corlys glared at him.

"You can't speak, but you can nod or shake your head," Rhaenyra said, her eyes narrow as she gazed at him. "Your guilt is all but assured, as is your punishment, but I would have your confession anyway."

"It won't help you live any longer, but it might help you die faster," Daemon drawled and Qarl began to shake, tears streaming down his cheeks.

"Did you do it?" Corlys asked, his voice strained. "Did you murder my son?"

Qarl nodded, trying to force out something that sounded vaguely like an apology, and Rhaenys shook with rage.

"Why?" she hissed. "He was your friend; he treated you with nothing but respect and kindness. Why?!"

Qarl babbled something, openly weeping at that point, and his every attempt at a word made her angrier. It was a rage she hadn't known since she learned that her father had been killed by craven pirates in Tarth, only far worse. The man before her hadn't been an avowed enemy of her house or even a common criminal seeking to strike against them; he had been a household knight in their service and a dear friend of her beloved son. The betrayal of it all stung nearly as badly as the gaping hole she swore she could feel in her chest, and before she knew what she was doing, she'd grabbed a weapon from the belt of one of the guards and rushed forward.

"Rhaenys!" Corlys exclaimed, reaching for her, but Daemon swatted his hand away, too curious to see what his cousin had in mind for the mace she'd just taken, only for his eyes to widen in shock when she swung it in a downward arc, catching Qarl right between the legs.

An inhuman scream erupted from his broken face, Rhaenys having struck just right to pin one of his testicles to the stone wall he was bound to, making it burst and his whole world turn to agony. Daemon let Corlys go, seeing Laena lurch as though about to throw up, and he pulled his wife back as their son's murderer squealed in pain, convulsing against the wall until his wrists started to bleed from chafing. Rhaenyra watched in shock as Rhaenys struggled against Corlys, clearly wanting to hit him again, and she signaled for Jon to take the mace, which he quickly did.

"I hope that caused you half the pain I feel, you traitorous cunt!" the older princess screamed, her voice raw.

"You're going to die for killing him, Qarl," Corlys growled, holding his wife as she stopped struggling and wept. "I'm going to enjoy watching the fires take you."

"I'm alright, I'm alright," Laena muttered, feeling her stomach settle as Qarl continued to wail in pain. Glaring at the screaming man, she hissed, "He loved you; you were his dearest friend, and you killed him for nothing. I'd have Vhagar end you, but her fires burn too hot, and I wouldn't see you die that quickly."

"By rights, it should be Seasmoke," Rhaenys hissed, "but getting him to cooperate right now would be...difficult."

"I could drop him off near Seasmoke and watch to make sure," Jon offered and Rhaenys shook her head.

"No," the princess replied. "I appreciate the offer, but I would watch him die myself."

"We got his confession, which together with all the other evidence, I say is more than enough," Rhaenyra commented. "Qarl Correy, you will be dragged before me later today and formally tried before witnesses for the crime of murder, at which point you will be sentenced to death. Meleys flames will be the last thing you ever see. Ensure that he's in the throne room at noon. We'll get things over with then."

"Yes, Princess," Harwin nodded, and she closed her eyes, knowing that even with Qarl set to die that day, the nightmare he'd unleashed was nowhere near over.

"Everyone's on edge," Alys Rivers commented as she was ushered into the Red Keep, having been invited by her father.

"Alys?" Larys asked, hobbling over as he spotted her.

"You sound surprised, brother," Alys murmured. "Surely Father told you that I was coming."

"He did, but you weren't expected so soon," Larys replied.

"I left earlier than intended," Alys replied. "I got the sense it would turn out well. Are you able to tell me what's happened?"

"You don't know already?" her clubfooted brother asked.

"You're the Master of Whispers, not me," Alys grinned, and he rolled his eyes.

"You generally know more than you should," Larys scowled. "I..."

"Alys," Lyonel's deep, gruff voice called out, and they both turned to see their father approaching.

"Father," she replied, nodding her head.

"You're early...but your timing...is fortuitous," Lyonel said.

"I suppose she could go with the servants," Larys nodded, catching on to what his father meant.

"Go?" Alys asked.

"His Grace will be traveling...to Dragonstone...this day," Lyonel replied. "A number of servants...will be going with them...and you can go on their ship."

"Such a sudden departure," Alys murmured. "Did the princess birth her babes already?"

"You will learn all that you need to when you need to," Larys sneered, and she just smiled.

"As you say," Alys replied, her green eyes boring into his dark ones until he looked away, just as uncomfortable in the presence of his bastard sister as he'd always been.

"You'll leave in mere hours," Lyonel said. "Take her to the servant's quarters...so she can prepare for the next stage...of her journey...and I'll inform his grace...of the extra servant."

"Yes, Lord Hand," one of the servants replied. "This way."

Alys followed the man, looking around and noting how tense virtually everyone seemed to be.

"It must have been as I saw in the flames," Alys thought to herself. "The seahorse died at sea as the future of the dragons was born. I wonder if that means that the other vision will be coming true as well."

She hoped it was, as she really did want to see the black dragon with the head of a wolf, barely able to grasp how such a thing could exist. Her visions had changed dramatically some moons ago, for reasons she still wasn't sure about, and yet she got the sense that this dragon-wolf creature was involved somehow. Whatever the answer was, she was confident it would be fascinating, and she was eagerly awaiting whatever would come of her summons.